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Student National Pharmaceutical Association

See National Pharmaceutical Association.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

At a meeting in April 1960 at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, African American college students who were participants in the 1960 sit-in movement to desegregate southern lunch counters agreed to establish the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The principal organizer of the gathering was Ella Baker, a veteran civil rights organizer and an official of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Baker invited representatives of other organizations to the meeting, but she also encouraged the more than 120 student attendees to remain autonomous rather than to affiliate with SCLC or one of the other existing civil rights groups. The students admired SCLC leader Martin Luther King Jr., who addressed the gathering, but were generally reluctant to compromise the autonomy of their local protest groups and gave only tentative support to the idea of creating a permanent regional organization, even if under student leadership. They voted to establish a temporary coordinating body, with Fisk University student Marion Barry to serve as chairman. Vanderbilt University theology student James Lawson, whose workshops on nonviolence served as a training ground for many of the Nashville student protesters, wrote an organizational statement of purpose, which reflected the strong commitment to Gandhian nonviolence that would pervade SNCC during its early years: "We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian traditions seeks a social order of justice permeated by love."

After the Raleigh conference, a small group of volunteers worked with Baker at the SCLC headquarters to maintain channels of communications among the assertively independent local student protest groups. In June 1960 the first issue of SNCC's newspaper, the *Student Voice*, appeared, and during the summer SNCC representatives delivered statements calling for civil rights reform at the Democratic and Republican national conventions. As a result of a second conference of 138 students on October 14–16 in Atlanta, SNCC acquired a more defined organizational structure. Student representatives agreed to establish a policy-making Coordinating Committee to be composed of one representative from each state and the District of Columbia. Kentucky State student Edward King became SNCC's Executive Secretary. After Barry resigned to return to graduate school, Charles McDew of South Carolina State College was selected to replace him as chair.

As SNCC "freedom fighters" became deeply involved in an expanding social movement in the South, they developed a distinctive style of protest and of community organizing that inspired many black southerners and stimulated mass movements under indigenous leadership. A brash willingness to challenge powerful institutions and their experimental approach to life made SNCC organizers particularly effective in the most racially repressive regions of the Black Belt where blacks saw SNCC's militancy as an alternative to cultural and political conformity. As SNCC workers came together to form an activist community in the midst of a politically awakening black populace, they were transformed by their experiences. They became role models for a generation of young activists, inside and outside the South, who challenged many of the assumptions that made possible the continued existence of injustice and oppression in American society. SNCC's militancy particularly influenced the early development of the predominantly white New Left group, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

SNCC's emergence as a significant force in the southern civil rights movement came largely through the involvement of students in the 1961 Freedom Ride campaign, which was designed to bring about desegregation of eating facilities at southern bus terminals. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) organized the initial Freedom Ride in May, but after this CORE's effort was stymied by violent assaults on Freedom Riders traveling through Alabama. Students from Nashville, under the leadership of Fisk University student Diane Nash, resolved to continue the rides. Once the new group of Freedom Riders demonstrated

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their determination to continue the rides into Mississippi, other students joined the movement. The resulting threat of major racial violence in Birmingham and Montgomery forced President John F. Kennedy and other members of his administration to become involved. During June hundreds of student protesters were jailed in Mississippi, but by the fall of 1961 the campaign had produced a cadre of highly committed student activists who were willing to become full-time SNCC workers.

As SNCC acquired a staff of organizers and full-time protesters, the group established major projects in those areas of the Deep South where segregationist resistance was greatest. The Albany, Georgia, campaign, which soon expanded to the nearby rural areas of southwest Georgia, was one of the most sustained of these efforts. Former Virginia Union theology student Charles Sherrod initiated voter registration and desegregation programs in Albany during the fall of 1961. He worked close with local students and older black residents who formed a group called the Albany Movement, which invited King and other SCLC officials to participate in major protests during December 1961 and the summer of 1962. These protests, which brought in few concessions from white officials, highlighted SNCC workers' increasing disillusionment with King's top-down leadership style and with the Kennedy administration's reluctance to intervene forcefully on behalf of the civil rights movement.

The most extensive of SNCC's organizing efforts occurred in Mississippi, the state with the lowest proportion of registered voters in the black population and the highest level of white resistance to racial integration. After participating in an unsuccessful voting rights project in McComb, Mississippi, during the fall of 1961, former Harvard University graduate student Bob Moses moved to Jackson and began recruiting young Mississippi residents to serve as field secretaries, mainly in the Mississippi Delta region. Moses, who eventually became voter-registration director of Mississippi's Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), which included SNCC as well as other civil rights groups, epitomized SNCC's nonhierarchical, grassroots organizing approach. Despite confronting considerable racist violence and intimidation, the Mississippi voter registration effort created conditions for racial reform by bringing together three crucial groups: dynamic and determined SNCC field secretaries, influential civil rights leaders from Mississippi (most notably Amzie Moore of Cleveland, Mississippi, Aaron Henry of Clarksdale, and Fannie Lou Hamer of Ruleville), and white student volunteers who participated in the Freedom Vote

mock election of October 1963 and the Freedom Summer campaign of 1964. Early in 1964 SNCC supported the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) in order to challenge the legitimacy of the all-white regular Democratic Party of the state. After one black and two white civil rights workers were murdered by white segregationists in June 1964, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) stepped up its investigation of anti-black violence, and the voter registration effort garnered unprecedented press coverage. Yet, although violent attacks against voter registration workers declined after the summer, many SNCC workers were disturbed by the failure of President Lyndon B. Johnson and other Democratic leaders to support the MFDP challenge to the seating of the regular delegates at the August 1964 national Democratic convention. Moreover, racial tensions within SNCC became more evident after the summer as many of the white volunteers in Mississippi sought to join SNCC's staff.

By this time, SNCC began a period of internal ideological ferment, as staff members began to question some of the assumptions underlying their previous activities. During intense and extended debates, staff members challenged not only SNCC's interracial composition but also its guiding ideals. Initially dominated by advocates of Christian Gandhianism, during the period after 1961 SNCC increasingly became a secular community of organizers devoted to the development of indigenous black leaders and local institutions. As the focus of the southern black struggle changed from desegregation to political and economic concerns, SNCC's radicalism was increasingly influenced by Marxian and black nationalist rather than religious ideals, although a theme of moral outrage remained evident in SNCC's public criticisms of the federal government and of Cold War liberalism. Having shifted its focus from nonviolent desegregation protests to long-term voting rights campaigns in the deep South, SNCC policies and direction were increasingly determined not by the coordinating committee, which rarely met, or by its officers, but by its field secretaries, who worked for nominal salaries and insisted on a great degree of autonomy. John Lewis' controversial speech at the 1963 March on Washington, which questioned the adequacy of the Kennedy administration's civil rights activities, only hinted at SNCC workers' growing sense of disillusionment with conventional liberalism and their identification with the emergent sense of racial pride and potency that had resulted from the southern struggle.

The crucial series of voting rights demonstrations that began early in 1965 in Selma, Alabama, stimulated

increasingly bitter ideological debates within the group, as some SNCC workers openly challenged the group's previous commitment to nonviolent tactics and its willingness to allow the participation of white activists. In addition to these bitter conflicts over racial issues, SNCC was also divided by conflicts between "hardliners" favoring greater organizational discipline and "floaters" emphasizing the freedom of staff members to direct their own activities. Distracted by such divisive issues, the day-to-day needs of the group's ongoing projects suffered from neglect. In many deep Southern communities where SNCC had once attracted considerable black support, the group's influence waned.

Nevertheless, some SNCC workers were buoyed by their success in challenging SCLC's more cautious leadership during the Selma voting rights campaign and the resulting march to the state capitol in Montgomery. During the spring of 1965, SNCC organizers entered the rural area between the two cities and helped black residents launch the all-black Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), soon known as the Black Panther party. Meanwhile, a few SNCC workers established incipient organizing efforts in volatile urban black ghettos.

These new initiatives, designed to capture the support of previously unorganized but discontented blacks, strengthened support for racial separatism. In addition, the gulf between SNCC and its former liberal allies enlarged. Early in 1966 the lack of a federal response to the killing of Tuskegee Institute student Sammy Younge when he attempted to use a segregated filling station restroom prompted other SNCC workers to overcome their previous reluctance to take a stand opposing United States involvement in the Vietnam war. SNCC's opposition to the Vietnam war generated further controversy when the Georgia legislature refused to allow newly elected representative Julian Bond of SNCC to take his seat due to Bond's support of the antiwar stand. The following summer SNCC's relations with the Johnson administration reached a low point when the group refused to attend a presidential conference on civil rights.

In May 1966, a new stage in SNCC's history began with the election of SNCC's chair Stokely Carmichael, who had helped establish the Lowndes County project. Because Carmichael identified himself with the trend away from nonviolence and interracialism, his election over the more moderate John Lewis damaged SNCC's relations with more moderate civil rights groups, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the SCLC, and with many of its

white supporters. During the month following his election, Carmichael publicly expressed SNCC's new political orientation when he began calling for "Black Power" during a voting rights march through Mississippi. The national controversy surrounding Carmichael's black power speeches brought increased notoriety to SNCC, but the group remained internally divided over its future direction. SNCC's staff did not determine how militant racial consciousness could be used to achieve tangible gains and thereby provided an opportunity for more moderate leaders to exploit black power rhetoric for their own purposes. As the ambiguous black power slogan became linked with programs ranging from the election of black politicians and the development of black capitalism to the creation of a new black value system and the fostering of a black revolution, Carmichael's most sophisticated statement on black power failed to provide a coherent and radical set of ideas for future black struggles. Co-authored by political scientist Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967) eclectically drew ideas from Third World nationalist movements and Western scholarly studies of those movements. The book, which they described as "a political framework and ideology which represents the last reasonable opportunity for this society to work out its racial problems short of prolonged destructive guerrilla warfare," contained only vague references regarding the need for blacks to reject existing political rules and to adopt "new political forms." Carmichael's attempt to provide an intellectually defensible basis for the black power slogan soon gave way to a willingness on the part of many SNCC workers to allow black people to define the slogan through their militancy.

In addition, Carmichael himself found that his support within SNCC was tenuous once he became a highly visible leader in a group previously characterized by distrust of leaders. Even as he emerged as the preeminent national symbol of black power, other SNCC workers questioned his commitment to the ideal of racial separatism. Carmichael's opposition came mainly from members of SNCC's Atlanta Project, who saw themselves as disciples of Malcolm X. While the Atlanta organizers achieved only modest success in organizing blacks in the Vine City ghetto, they succeeded in pressing Carmichael and other SNCC officers to confront the issue of the continued presence of whites in SNCC. Racial separatists from the Atlanta Project and elsewhere hoped for a final resolution of the "white" question at a December 1966 staff meeting. After several days of rancorous debate that led some staff members to leave in disgust, the staff

members who remained narrowly passed a resolution excluding whites. Through their single-minded determination, the Atlanta Project staff dominated the December staff meeting, but their effort to expel whites was followed soon afterward by their own expulsion on grounds of insubordination.

Even after the dismissal of the Atlanta separatists, SNCC was weakened by continued internal conflicts and external attacks, which not only hampered its projects but also contributed to the loss of northern financial backing. To provide funds for payroll expenses, SNCC began to rely almost totally on speechmaking and its New York office, manned by professional fundraisers and veteran staff members. When these sources proved insufficient, staff members were forced to skip paychecks, prompting some to leave the organization in order to support themselves and their families. The selection in June 1967 of Hubert "Rap" Brown as SNCC's new chair was meant to reduce the notoriety the group had acquired as a result of Carmichael's speeches, but Brown sought to encourage the militancy of leaderless urban blacks and soon became as much of a firebrand as Carmichael had been. Although he announced that SNCC was moving from rhetoric to program, Brown soon became caught up in national controversy when he accepted an invitation from the Cambridge Action Federation, composed of former members of SNCC's affiliate in Cambridge and black youngsters reacting to an upsurge in anti-black activities by members of the Ku Klux Klan and the States Rights Party. Against a background of news reports of incipient black guerrilla warfare, Brown was blamed for the racial violence that erupted after his speech. Recently elected Maryland governor Spiro T. Agnew quickly became a leading symbol for law and order (and a successful candidate for the vice presidency) after he publicly condemned Brown and criticized black leaders who refused to join in his denunciation.

The subsequent federal campaign against black militancy severely damaged SNCC's ability to sustain its organizing efforts. The FBI's Counterintelligence Program (Cointelpro), for example, targeted SNCC as part of a concerted effort at all levels of government to crush black militancy through overt and covert means and through the more subtle techniques of cooptation and timely concessions. Having survived attacks by southern racists, SNCC withered under the assault of opponents with access to the enormous power of the federal government. SNCC executive director Ruby Doris Robinson's death from illness further weakened the organization.

Although severely weakened by police repression, loss of white financial support, and internal dissension and disarray, SNCC workers tried to establish close ties to revolutionary groups outside the United States. At the May 1967 meeting when staff members elected Rap Brown as chairman, they also declared SNCC a "Human Rights organization" and announced that they would "encourage and support the liberation struggles against colonialism, racism, and economic exploitation" around the world. Proclaiming a position of "positive non-alignment" in world affairs and indicating a willingness to meet with Third World governments and liberation groups, SNCC applied for nongovernment organization status on the United Nations Economic and Security Council. After being replaced by Brown as SNCC's chair, Carmichael traveled extensively to build ties with revolutionary movements in Africa and Asia. During his 1967 tour of Third World nations, Carmichael portrayed black urban rebellions in the United States as part of the international socialist movement.

Upon his return to the United States, Carmichael participated in an abortive effort to establish an alliance between SNCC and the California-based Black Panther party. The FBI exploited the tensions that existed between Carmichael, who advocated racial unity, and Panther leaders, who stressed the need for class-based alliances that included white revolutionaries. Although Carmichael, Brown, and SNCC executive director James Forman believed that an alliance with the urban-based Black Panthers could bring new vitality to SNCC, the alliance foundered during the summer of 1968 due to ideological differences and misunderstandings resulting from anonymous letters sent by FBI agents.

The spontaneous urban uprisings that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968 indicated a high level of black discontent, but by then SNCC had little ability to mobilize the discontent into an effective political force. Its most effective community organizers had left the organization, which became known as the Student National Coordinating Committee. Although the increasing popularity of black militant rhetoric gave the appearance of racial unity, black communities were divided by serious conflicts between self-defined cultural nationalists, who urged blacks to unite around various conceptions of an African cultural ideal, and self-defined political revolutionaries who advocated armed struggle to achieve political or economic goals. SNCC's dwindling staff included adherents of each of the two major trends, but by 1968 both factions had begun to doubt whether SNCC would remain the principal vehicle to reach their

goals. Although individual SNCC activists played significant roles in African American politics during the period after 1968, and many of the controversial ideas that once had defined SNCC's radicalism had become widely accepted among blacks, the organization disintegrated. By the end of the decade, FBI surveillance of SNCC's remaining offices was discontinued due to lack of activity.

FURTHER READING

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